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Preserving Small Farms in Gales Creek, Oregon: An Interview with Gales Creek Residents

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Preserving Small Farms in Gales Creek, Oregon: An interview with Gales Creek residents

Nathan Williams: Can you tell me about yourselves and the work you do in Gales Creek?

Anne Berblinger: Rene and I have Gale's Meadow Farm. We grow organic heirloom vegetables on about seven acres, with woods and hedgerow that are devoted to wildlife. We sell directly at farmers' markets and to restaurants. Almost all of our employees have been aspiring farmers. We're a learning farm; for the past three years we've had interns through the Rogue Farm Corps

Chas Hundley: I've lived in Gales Creek all my life. My family has been in the Gales Creek Valley since 1881. I'm a journalist. I run a local paper in Gales Creek and one in Banks and surrounding communities.

Sue Vosberg: I run Forest Grove Tax Service, and specialize in helping farmers, foresters, and small businesses. We bought our place here in 1976. We had a solar design business. In 1988 we started the nursery. We specialized in things that didn't need a greenhouse and that wouldn't be competing with Colombia and Ecuador, stuff that liked Oregon, like phlox, solidaster, peonies, and berries. Now my husband's semi-retired and still growing half a dozen things that we sell through a friend.

Aurora Parras: I did the Rogue Farm Corps program last season and I loved it so much and I love Oregon so much. So, I came here to live and pursue farming and I'm trying to start my own baking and pastry business now.

Joyce Sauber: My family came here in 1864. I live next to the family farm, not on it. I've been here for eighty-three years. I do Gales Creek history and I volunteer at the school. I have an acre of ground and grow a big organic garden. I've seen a lot of history in Gales Creek, seen a lot of buildings and people come and go, and I fought for a lot of things. I never thought I would protest on the steps of the capitol, but I did.

Lis Monahan: My husband Steve and I operate Fraga Farmstead Creamery. We purchased the farm ten years ago, and we've been going at the current scale for six years. We make eight different kinds of organic goat cheese; we're the only certified organic goat cheese in Oregon and possibly the West Coast.

Anna Lund: I've moved and come back. I really like the Gales Creek community. I was drawn here to study in Forest Grove. I've lived in a lot of places, but I'm glad to call this area home. I live in Hillsboro now, but I work and play here.

Chas Hundley: I helped start the Gales Creek Chamber of Commerce in my teens. I'm chamber president and I run our local citizens participation Preserving Small Farms in Gales Creek, Oregon An interview with Gales Creek residents by Nathan Williams organization, a program through Washington County. It's neighbors discussing livability issues and connecting with elected officials. We've met with state

representatives, Metro councilors, the fire board, and others. We meet once a month here and in Verboort.



Covered rows reduce water usage. Photo: Nathan Williams

Nathan Williams: I'm a Portland State University student studying urban planning, so I'm interested in the planning issues in Gales Creek.

Anne Berblinger: I can talk a little bit about that. You're familiar with the 2050 process, where a few years ago urban reserves and rural reserves were set up in the three core metro counties. At the first public hearing, they had a map with one color for urban reserves, another color for incorporated cities, one for urban reserves where the cities could expand, and another color for rural reserves that were supposed to preserve farm and other resource land. But the

whole Gales Creek Valley was white. I asked the Washington County planner why, and he said, "It's all a flood plain, it'll never develop, so we're not going to pay attention to it." Several people testified and it turned into the color for rural reserves.

It's the greatest place to grow trees, and should be preserved as farmland. Having the land use restrictions is important but not sufficient. Land use laws and exclusive-farm-use zoning, held land values down and allowed ordinary people like us to buy land here in 1991. But the value now, even exclusive-farmuse land, has gone through the roof. It means that owners are older than the average age of Oregon farmers—over sixty. Access to the land for young people is really limited. It's a really big problem. In order for a farmer to pay a mortgage on land, farming has to be a lot more lucrative than it has been.

Nathan Williams: What do you think the biggest challenges to farmland preservation in Gales Creek are?

Anne Berblinger: I think the price of land is one, and the reluctance of farmers' offspring to go into farming. On the other hand, there are people, like Aurora and Anna, who are just really excited about going into farming. We've probably had fifteen or more young people, not from farming families, who have worked on our farm, under the Rogue Farm Corps or otherwise, who really want to be farmers. But opportunities like we offer are few and far between.

Lis Monahan: But even people who are from farming families, including big farming, are trying to get land here and can't. One young farmer put a mobile home on his parents' property to save money. But they're not feeling hopeful, because the

closest large property is \$600,000, and even if you're a big farmer with big combines it's too expensive. That's a thing I find shocking. I always think, "We little farmers, we're struggling financially, but maybe the big guys are doing okay." But you talk to them and find out they can't go on vacation and have to do all their own welding because they can't afford to use a machine shop.

So the financial rewards of farming are another problem. In other businesses, if you rent retail space, the price is going to have some relationship to the business opportunity, to traffic flow, or estimated sales of that retail space. When you go into farming, the land price stands in no relationship to the land's likely yield.

We're just outside of the metro area, but we're still going to have the new minimum wage. It's going to be difficult for farmers to hire help. There are downsides to being close to an urban area. Short drives to the farmer's market, that's good, but the land prices!

Anne Berblinger: Our booth at Hollywood is surrounded by farms from outside the metro area that are not paying the same wages we are. At Cannon Beach they're a rural area, so they pay the minimum of the new minimum wage. We try to compete on the quality of our product, because we can't compete on price. We've got to charge more than the other guys.

Chas Hundley: I think another threat to continued farming out here is that many farms are multi-generational. It's always been that way. You're more likely to become a farmer if your parents were farmers. But out here, when you grow up and marry, you can't say, "I want to continue farming with my

family, " because you have to find somewhere to live, and you can't just build a house out here, because the land is zoned for exclusive farm use. It's incredibly difficult to build another dwelling. And even if you do, the costs are astronomical. But you can't afford to just go out and buy property near the farm. My family's been here for 140 years and I can't afford to live in my own community. Now imagine being somebody who wants to continue farming but your parents are still around, still using the house, you've got three or four siblings. You can't all live there. What are you going to do?

Lis Monahan: On a farm you are allowed to have an additional dwelling for the retiring farmers. But it has to be immobile. I mean there is that opportunity

Chas Hundley: In order to afford working on the land, you also have to have a day job. We have that kind of mixed economy; it has made it possible for us to be here in the first place

Sue Vosberg: Yeah, that was our case too, and we pulled money out of our IRAs back in the day, just to make it. It's tough, especially the first ten years or so. So I think that's a trend that's been going for a long time.

Nathan Williams: Very few families get their income solely from the farm.

Sue Vosberg: I would say that's really true. Forestry's even worse, because you're talking fifty years. Everybody asks us, "Well, when are you going to make money off those trees?" We didn't do it just for the money, obviously. One of the reasons

we did it is to help the watershed here, for the creek to come back. But it's not a get-rich-quick thing.

Joyce Sauber: I think really until the 1950s or 1960s people could make a living off their farm. But after the war, things began to change.

Nathan Williams: Is there anything else for that question, challenges for farmland preservation?

Sue Vosberg: It would be an interesting study. There have been creative ideas like land trusts and ways to go through Adelante Mujeres like our neighbors, who leased land to a married couple. And I know the forestry people have talked about trying to get carbon credits worked out, because when you plant a forest you're sequestering carbon. But that hasn't happened yet.

Don't they have some kind of a thing outside Paris where farms with small holdings are subsidized? Maybe we need to do that as a society—just have a bigger vision

Anne Berblinger: Portland State and others from Rogue Farm Corps and Oregon State University actually did a whole study about farmland in Oregon. All of the things people are saying are in that study, but we do need creative ideas. I had the concept that Metro should issue bonds and buy farmland to lease long-term to new farmers.

Sue Vosberg: There you go.

Lis Monahan: Friends of Family Farmers did a forum on that issue. I remember that there's an eighty-eighty rule. You have to have eighty acres to establish your residence or \$80,000 in net farm sales. So, potentially, you could farm land but not live on it. That was a sore point with aspiring farmers. One speaker said, with the increasing value of land, lawyers and dentists would buy the larger parcels and turn around and lease the land to beginning farm – ers. Someone piped up in the audience, "That's serfdom!"

Anne Berblinger: And when has that even happened? Instead, retired executives buy land and plant grapes.

Aurora Parras: Or trees, I've seen people plant trees—huge swaths and a mansion. "Oh, what a waste!"

Sue Vosberg: I do think the vineyard land prices are having an impact.

Anne Berblinger: We believe that the property next to us, which was a nursery, is going to be a marijuana growing operation.

Sue Vosberg: That's a growth industry.

Anne Berblinger: I wasn't paying attention at all when they did the land use laws, but that's an industrial process. It should be in industrial parks. It should not be on farm – land, because they pave it over and build buildings. They use a lot of electricity and water, too.

Craig Lund: There's a whole bunch of buildings in Forest Grove zoned industrial that are empty or barely used. They would be perfect for that kind of thing. But instead they're using prime areas that should be used for food or lumber production.

Rene Berblinger: And many of these mari – juana growers are coming from out of state with big money.

Joyce Sauber: Another issue in Gales Creek is water rights. You guys have had your water shut off mid-summer—we all have. My water right goes back to the 1930s, and they still shut it down. So you have to wonder – how the people growing marijuana will water it.

Rene Berblinger: We've got a three-thousand-gallon tank for our little spring here, because we got cut off.

Anne Berblinger: It used to be that the water wasn't shut off at all, or not until the end of August, which wasn't a problem. But two years ago it was shut off in June. The crops aren't even established by then.

Rene Berblinger: Now we do drip irrigation almost exclusively. We're allowed to use our well, and we have the spring, so we collect water.

Anne Berblinger: There are a lot of advantages to the drip irrigation. It would be really nice if there were some rewards for conservation.

Nathan Williams: I originally became interested in the story in terms of Forest Grove and the expansion of their urban growth boundary and how development is moving in this direction. So, how do you feel about that?

Sue Vosberg: The water limitations will prevent it from moving toward Gales Creek. My understanding is there's no chance of getting a water line up the valley



Gales Creek Community Church of God. Photo: M. O. Stevens, Creative Commons

Anne Berblinger: On other sides of Forest Grove, expansion is a big issue, and there is a whole other story there. And part of it is, again, making farms economically viable. There's a project going on now called Tuality Plains Great Grains. It's spearheaded by Charlene Murdock and Richard White, who live in Forest Grove and have a one-acre farm inside Forest Grove. They're working with a third-generation farmer who has 600

acres right on the city limits. He's always been a conventional commodity farmer, but he wanted to start growing things people could actually eat and enjoy. He connected with Charlene, and last winter he planted six acres of red fife and some kind of barley. Charlene has hooked him up with bakers, a brewery, and a distillery in Forest Grove who use his grain locally. So this is another agricultural innovation that may make it viable to keep a farm going right there on the edge of the city.

Craig Lund: The urban growth boundary may not be moving just due to logistical and state law issues, but it's really jarring to drive over David Hill Road and suddenly see a new town where farms, fields, and forests used to be.

Lis Monahan: It's coming. They've done the infrastructure for the last three years and now all the houses are popping up.

Craig Lund: We say that they won't come out here, but then I get that cold sweat when I'm driving over David Hill. Suddenly Forest Grove is a lot closer than it used to be. My dad grew up in Gales Creek; areas that people used to call Gales Creek are now Forest Grove. He was close to the city limits and it just grew up around him.

Lis Monahan: You can take a different vantage point on that too. For the small farmers to be viable they need to grow crops that are locally consumed and marketed directly to consumers. So, maybe a return to farm stands. Farm stands would be frequented by people who live in big developments. Also, if you have an aspect of agritainment—and while I think none of us want to host weddings on our farms and we hope that nobody ever starts doing that—I think Gales Creek might

benefit from an influx of new residents and new paychecks in Forest Grove, people who spend their money locally.

Craig Lund: Go ask David Hill Winery how their business is doing since the development there. It is packed every day that they're open. Lis Monahan: And they just called me this week asking to carry our cheese. The perfect example.

Craig Lund: There are definite positives. But it makes me nervous, because they keep pushing out. Right now they've stopped and they say they won't move, but what happens in thirty years?

Sue Vosberg: Well, I think if you look at the geology, for instance David Hill, and the fact that there's no water. It's very expensive to build there. In the 1970s the lower lots were cheaper there, but as they moved up the hill, more water pumping was needed and the lots got more expensive. So from an urban planning viewpoint, the land use laws, and the logistics of infrastructure, I don't think the expansion is going to happen in my lifetime.

Craig Lund: It's my problem; I'm twenty-two and I'm going to be here until I die.

Sue Vosberg: I hope it doesn't happen, because this area should stay rural.

Joyce Sauber: At one time there was a dam planned for across where Cox Road is. It would have flooded the whole valley. People were really concerned. But then they put in Highway 6,

and the dam wasn't viable.

Craig Lund: Yes, there's too much stuff out here now for them to feasibly flood the entire Gales Creek Valley

Nathan Williams: Well, thank you all for taking time out of your busy day to talk with us.



Photo: Nathan Williams